

Iron Block
205 East Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee
Milwaukee County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WIS-251

HABS
WIS,
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14-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. WIS-251

IRON BLOCK

Location: 205 East Wisconsin Avenue (southeast corner, East Wisconsin Avenue and North Water Street), Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.

Present Owner: Promised Land Corporation, Milwaukee

Present Occupants and Use: Shops and offices

Statement of Significance: The Iron Block is notable as one of Milwaukee's most prominent early commercial buildings. It is one of a small number of pre-Civil War structures remaining in the central business district and is the city's chief example of the use of cast-iron for a building's facade. The architect, George H. Johnson, was an English-born builder-architect who managed Daniel Badger's Architectural Iron Works company in New York.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1860-61. On March 20, 1860, fire destroyed a group of twenty-two small frame buildings on the east side of East Water (now North Water) Street and the south side of Wisconsin Street (now East Wisconsin Avenue) between East Water and Main (now Broadway). Two months later, Elisha Eldred, who had owned the structures at the corner of Water and Wisconsin, sold his lots to J. B. Martin for \$20,000. Martin's intention to erect an office and bank building on the site was enthusiastically reported by the local press, which then followed construction work with keen interest, for the location was an important one, and the block, to cost \$30,000-\$40,000, promised to be most imposing. On May 17, 1860, the Sentinel carried a brief but glowing description of the proposed building. A front-page story of August 1, by which date construction had begun, elaborated on the plans, the interior and exterior design, and the use of iron facades. In May and June of the following year, the paper reported installation of the cornice and flag pole and on September 21, 1861, stated that the "edifice is now receiving its finishing touches." (Still incomplete was the Masonic Hall on the top floor.) This last report was conspicuously less buoyant in tone than its predecessors.

The anonymous author expressed some skepticism about the durability of the cast-iron fronts and outright dismay about the appearance of the exterior. He supposed, however, that the public--excepting architects--would admire it. Whether attracted by its looks or by its splendid location, a full complement of tenants--including one architect--soon occupied the building, as newspaper stories of late 1861 and 1862 attest.

2. Architect: George H. Johnson, New York (possibly with Edward Townsend Mix, associate). There is a tradition, as old as the block itself, that Milwaukee's E. T. Mix had a hand in the project, and perhaps he did play some part, possibly serving as the architect's local associate. But the designer of the Iron Block was, in fact, G. H. Johnson, then manager of the architectural department of Daniel Badger's Architectural Iron Works in New York City. Johnson is named in at least one contemporary newspaper article, and confirmation that someone other than a Milwaukeean had drawn the plans appeared in the Sentinel report of September 21, 1861. Herein the writer denounces the building as "miserably below the standard of excellence formed by our own artists," calling it "a composite of different styles jumbled inharmoniously together, as though the builder had ransacked all the pattern shops of the East and bought up the worn out pattern of each, and 'lumped them' into a grand Western Palace." Much more to his liking was the new Hassett and Chapman store just south of the Iron Block on Water, a Mix design. Johnson's practice survived the withering review, and subsequent Sentinel articles labelled Martin's block "beautiful," "elegant," and "magnificent." Generally, it was well-received by nineteenth-century commentators. The building is listed on p. 25 of the "Catalogue of the Principal Works," in Daniel Badger's 1865 volume, Illustrations of Iron Architecture.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The block was built for James Baynard Martin (1814-1878), a Milwaukee grain and real estate dealer, insurance executive and banker. It remained in the Martin estate until 1960, when Producers, Inc. of Evansville, Indiana acquired it for \$640,000. Later it was sold to Polaris Real Properties, Inc. of Milwaukee; it was then purchased from this firm by the present owners, Promised Land Corporation, in 1967.
4. Builders and suppliers: According to the August 1, 1860 Sentinel, D. D. Sibley of Milwaukee served as builder-superintendent and a Mr. Shinn was in charge of the "mason work." Names of other contractors and craftsmen are yet to be discovered.

5. Alterations and additions:

- a. 1879: Elevator installed. This same elevator is still in service.
- b. 1880: The March 16 Sentinel reported unspecified improvements costing \$3,700. Prof. Herbert Rice of Marquette University speculates that these expenditures involved changes in the top floor, which from c. 1862 through 1879 had housed the Masonic Hall and related chambers. With completion of the new Masonic Hall in the Insurance Building, northwest corner of Wisconsin and Broadway, in 1880, the Iron Block's fourth floor no longer served this purpose and may well have been converted into suites of offices at this time.
- c. 1895: A building permit dated July 1 records structural changes in the first floor and roof costing \$1,000.
- d. 1899: A building permit for November 23 reports that owner Effie Hand Martin (J. B. Martin's daughter-in-law) planned to remodel and enlarge the block at a cost of \$40,000. Charles D. Crane and Carl Barkhausen are identified as architects, J. Leenhouts as carpenter, and E. Winter as mason. While the permit does not specify projected changes in the existing building, it does state that the addition was to measure 30 by 120 feet and to be built of brick, steel, and wood--thus describing the two-bay structure of five stories and attic now adjoining the Iron Block on Water Street.
- e. 1905-08: Building permits dated April 11, 1905, July 16, 1907, and October 5, 1908, give evidence of alterations on the north and west fronts, all of them involving remodelling of show-windows; those of 1905 and 1908 amounted to \$1,700 and \$1,200, respectively.

Comparison of early descriptions and photographs of the Iron Block with the building as it now stands reveals that the lower levels have been significantly altered. Although the building permits just cited are less detailed regarding remodelling than one might like, it is probable that the projects of 1895-1908 brought about this transformation. As first built, the Iron Block was a four-story building (with an attic) having a high basement in the northwest corner, lighted by windows in the Water Street (west) wall and in the two west bays of the Wisconsin Street (north) side. Stairways connected grade level with first-story entrances on both sides, the Water Street entry being in the central bay, and the one on the

Wisconsin Street side in the second bay from the west. East of the latter, in the three remaining bays of the north facade, were four street-level shops with entries on grade. First-story windows, like those in the floors above, were round-arched; basement windows had shallow, segmental arches. The west entrance, also arched, was surmounted by a balustrade. Today, the Water Street entrance and its balustrade no longer exist; the only entrance on that side being one to the grade-level shop on the northwest corner, in the area that was formerly a raised basement. All Wisconsin Avenue entrances are presently at street level and the entrance to the block lobby is now immediately below the former first-floor entrance. Windows of the first story are now rectangular, and the string course above them has been modified.

- f. Later twentieth century: Building permits record minor modifications, on the interiors and exteriors, of the street-level shops.
- g. Unspecified dates: Electricity installed; garlands ornamenting pilasters removed; inscriptions on north and west fronts removed; pedimented cornice cut back. (Evidently it remained intact through construction of the addition of 1899 as this structure is still crowned by a cornice echoing the design and profile of the original.)

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

James B. Martin was for thirty years an important figure in Milwaukee business circles. An officer of the Milwaukee Mutual Insurance Company, the U. S. Insurance Company, and the Wisconsin State Bank, he was also proprietor of the Reliance Mills. Real estate was another of his interests, and for a time his properties in downtown Milwaukee included not only the Iron Block but also a four-story brick building on the southwest corner of Water and Wisconsin. Built for Martin in 1850, this structure stood until 1882 when it was replaced by the Mack Block (which in turn, was razed to allow construction of the Marine Plaza during the 1960s.)

Newspaper stories from the period suggest that iron was then commonly used in Milwaukee's commercial buildings. One reads, for example, that in the facade of the Davis dry goods store, erected in 1860 on the east side of Water between Wisconsin and Michigan, architect Leonard Schmidtner employed iron details along with more conventional brick ornament. In another case, structural columns of iron were used in the nearby, con-

temporary Hassett and Chapman store, called the "iron building" by a Sentinel reporter and "The Great Iron Palace" in the firm's advertisements. Designed by E. T. Mix, Hassett and Chapman's may have had a cast-iron front as well. These same stories also make it clear, however, that none of the city's early essays in iron was as ambitious as Martin's block.

Martin's reasons for retaining G. H. Johnson as architect of the Iron Block are not known, but it is possible that the project's size was a factor. Unlike local architects of the day, Johnson possessed considerable experience in the design of cast-iron fronts for large buildings. Another possibility is suggested by a tradition that Martin wanted his block to duplicate one he had greatly admired in New York City--a structure then standing, so the story goes, at 14 Dey Street. This matter, together with the relationship of the Iron Block to other works by Johnson and the Badger firm, merit further investigation.

As first constructed, the building had inscriptions in the pediments of north and west facades reading "Excelsior Block" (for the owner's lodge of the I.O.O.F.) and "Masonic Hall," respectively. It was by these titles and "Martin's Block" that the structure was most often identified in the local papers and city directories of the 1860s and '70s. "Iron Block" was used as early as 1861 but was not common until after 1880.

The 1899 addition to the Iron Block replaced the four-story Hassett and Chapman Store. The architects, Charles D. Crane (1850-1928) and Carl Barkhausen (1860-1934) had designed a number of projects for the Martin family. Foremost among these were the Martin Apartments (1889), located at the northeast corner of East Wisconsin Avenue and North Cass Street. Believed to have been Milwaukee's first steel-framed building, this block, later known as the Martin Hotel, was razed in 1958.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Four photographs, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. a) View from northwest showing in full both north and west facades (ca. 1861-1872). b) View from northwest taken on Grand (now East Wisconsin) Avenue (ca. 1861-1872). c) View from North Water Street, showing northwest portion of building (undated). d) View from northwest, "Taken from old, undated Stereopair." (See HABS photocopies.) There are many early views of the exterior. Especially valuable are the photographs preserved in the Milwaukee County Historical Society's "Old Settlers' Scrapbook." Published photos and drawings dating from the late nineteenth cen-

tury include: Milwaukee's Leading Industries, New York, 1886, 76; Milwaukee--Indelible Photographs, New York, n.d., 1; the Sentinel's Illustrated Description of Milwaukee, 1890, 24 and 106; and Milwaukee--100 Photogravures, 1892, 57. Also important are early views located in the photographic collections of the Local History Department, in the Milwaukee Public Library. Illustrations of other buildings by the Badger firm are included in Illustrations of Iron Architecture; specifically see plates VII, XXXII, XLVI, LVIII.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Building permits and other records, General Office, Inspector of Buildings, 1010 Municipal Building, Milwaukee.

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Milwaukee Writers' Project, History of Milwaukee County,
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"The New Masonic Hall," Milwaukee Sentinel, August 1, 1860, 1.

"Obsequies of J. B. Martin," Milwaukee Sentinel, January 24, 1878, 8.

Perrin, Richard W. E., "Milwaukee Landmarks; Part III. Commercial and Industrial Buildings," Lore, XVI, Fall, 1966, 124.

"Realty and Improvements," Milwaukee Sentinel, March 16, 1880, 8.

"Removals," Milwaukee Sentinel, December 18, 1861, 1.

Rice, Herbert W., "The Iron Block Building" (letter), Milwaukee Journal, June 26, 1964, Pt. 1, 12.

/Untitled articles/, Milwaukee Sentinel, March 15, 1862, I and October 11, 1866, 1.

Wheeler, Andrew C., The Chronicles of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, 1861, 285.

3. Potential sources not consulted: This writer was unable to see Daniel Badger's 1865 catalogue illustrations of Iron Architecture--which could prove exceedingly instructive. Accounts in local papers other than the Sentinel of plans for and construction of the building might be of interest, and study of newspaper stories for the period 1895-1908 might well uncover answers to questions about changes made in the block during those years.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: In style, the Iron Block, like so many of its contemporaries, is distantly related to Venetian Renaissance palazzi. Johnson composed the cast-iron street fronts in three horizontal bands separated by string courses at second and fourth stories and crowned by a pedimented cornice. His design for the Wisconsin Street (north) elevation comprises five bays, the first, third, and fifth with three arched window openings in each of the upper stories, the second and fourth with

four--in all, an open, light, rhythmical scheme. Three narrow bays make up the East Water Street (west) front, the central bay having Palladian windows in the three upper floors. Pilasters with simulated rustication were originally decorated with floral garlands. These divide the bays and mark the corners of the facades. Originally, the building had entrances on both Water and Wisconsin, and, in altered form, only the pedimented north portal remains.

2. Condition of fabric: Poor

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The original building measures 40 feet (north-south dimension) by 120 feet, the addition 30 feet (north-south) by 120 feet.
2. Foundation: Probably resting on timber grillage over wood pilings, the visible portion of the foundation consists of three irregular courses of sandstone and, above them, a row of inverted semi-circular arches of brick (three courses) surmounted by a single course of stone. Limestone ashlar fills the areas between and within the brick arches. Foundations of this type, incorporating inverted arches, were believed to reinforce the walls against inward collapse and to distribute the vertical load over a greater wall area. The Iron Block may well be Milwaukee's sole remaining example of this type of construction.
3. Wall construction (original building): West and north walls, cast-iron plates; east wall, brick (as was the south wall); internal structure, brick and timber. The cast-iron wall plates replicate dressed ashlar, while the pilasters imitate vermiculated blocks. Originally the street facades were painted white. They and the brick front of the addition are now painted light gray.
4. Chimneys: Photographs from the collection of the Local History Department in the Milwaukee Public Library show eight chimneys on the original building, located as follows: three on the east half of the south wall, three in the northwest quadrant of the roof, and two on the north half of the east wall. One of these remains and there is a tall chimney on the addition. These same photographs also show two framed structures to the northeast of the building's center; these may have been skylights or access hatches to the roof.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: In the north elevation, there are now five entrances to shops along Wisconsin Avenue and one to the lobby of the block itself, this last being what remains of the original entry to the block's first (now second) floor. The stairway from Wisconsin Avenue to that level has long since been removed, and one now enters on grade. The original entry in the west elevation has also been removed. At present there is a single entrance in this facade, giving access to a recently opened shop on street level. In the east wall of the addition are two doors, one of which is no longer in use.
- b. Windows: The original windows lighting the raised basement of the corner shop at Wisconsin and Water were set below grade and consisted of wood frame, double-hung sashes with basket-handle arches. These have been replaced with fixed lights, illuminating the shop that is now entered from Water Street. The four original shops along Wisconsin had tall glass display cases with round-arch window heads. Presently five shops occupy the same space, each with altered shopfronts and fixed display glass. The first floor of the Iron Block, originally occupied by a bank in the northwest corner, had windows like those on the second, third and fourth floors. These have been replaced by fixed, rectangular display windows.

The sashes used on all floors throughout the building were of wooden frame, four-over-four double-hung configuration; many of these survive in their original form. Each has round heads, upon which is superimposed two decorative arches executed in cast iron. These arches are positioned so as to float above the top half of each sash, dividing the upper window opening into equal halves. Immediately above these arches is positioned cast-iron work of grape clusters and leaves. The arched wall openings are also decorated by the grape clusters and leaves.

When the Iron Block was first completed the north facade had fifty-seven round arch windows, five basement windows and the street level display cases. The Water Street facade is divided into three narrow bays. The central bay of the three upper floors have Palladian windows with the sashes set into the wall plane. At the building's completion, this facade had sixteen round arch windows, three Venetian groups and four basement windows.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape: Originally the building had a hipped roof of slight pitch, its major axis being east-west. Immediately behind the pediments at the cornice were small gables that carried the line of the pediment back into the roof. Today, both the block and addition have flat roofs with a skylight where the two meet.
- b. Framing: Timber
- c. Cornice: Iron; broken by pediments at the center of north and west fronts; this was altered after 1899.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Concerning the original arrangement of the interior, contemporary newspaper stories are informative:

A Sentinel reporter writing on May 17, 1860, when the block was in the planning stage, stated that it would comprise "four stories . . . divided into stores on Wisconsin Street; banking house on the corner 40 x 40 ft.; second story . . . lawyers' offices; third story, lawyers' offices; fourth story, public hall; basement, two banking offices . . ."

On August 1, 1860, the same paper published this description:

"Over basement offices, will be the bank 24 x 40, with very fine entrances on each street. There will also be four stores on this floor, with entrances all on Wisconsin Street, besides offices and two bank vaults, together with a main entrance to rooms above.

"On the second floor we are to have twelve offices arranged in handsome suites with closets and wardrobes, etc., attached to each, and on the third floor, thirteen offices equally as comfortable. On the fourth floor is to be the Masonic Hall, 40 x 80--a splendid room, with large raised platform in the shape of an arc reaching across the east end, and ante and reception rooms, of unusual size."

And a third account in the Sentinel, written in September, 1861, after the block had opened, reported:

"The first floor contains four stores, one office, and a room intended for a bank. The

stores are fifteen feet wide and thirty-eight feet deep. The Bank is thirty-six by thirty-eight, and is entered by abrupt steps on either street. There are twelve offices on the next floor [each of the next two floors?], and above is the Masonic Hall, thirty-eight by seventy . . .

"The arrangement of the offices is uniform; they, like the stores, are merely straight niches with entrances . . ."

Today, the ground floor contains an elevator-lobby stair-hall, entered on Wisconsin Avenue immediately below the old first-floor entrance, and six shops, five of them east of this entrance, and the last in the northwest corner of the block in an area that was formerly referred to as the basement. Above this area, on the first story where there was once a bank and office space, there are three suites of offices. On the second and third floors, which appear to have undergone relatively few modifications, offices open off a central (east-west) corridor, in a pattern which is repeated on the fourth floor, where no trace of the Masonic Hall remains. Above is the attic. A light well, extending from the second to the top floor, is located between the original block and the addition.

2. Stairways: A stairway in the lobby joins the ground level, the sub-basement, and the first floor; a narrow stairway connects the first and upper stories. This last may well be original.
3. Elevator: As noted, the elevator installed in 1879 is still in use. It is located near the southeast corner of the building.
4. Flooring: Entrance lobby, mosaic tile; floors above ground story, wood.
5. Wall and ceiling finish: Chiefly wooden lath and plaster.
6. Doorways and doors: Wooden. On first and fourth floors, rectangular doorways, wood stained golden brown, door and doorways not original. On second and third floors, round-arched doorways, wood stained very dark brown, most doors and doorways probably original.
7. Trim: Wooden, in the main. It appears that much of the original trim survives on the second and third floors.

8. Hardware: If any original hardware remains, it will be found on the second and third stories.

9. Lighting: Electric throughout

D. Site:

General setting and orientation: The Iron Block stands on a corner site bounded on the west by North Water Street, on the north by East Wisconsin Avenue, on the east by an alley, and, beyond the addition on the south, by a small brick store built in 1860-61.

Prepared by Mary Ellen Wietczykowski
1111 North Astor Street
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
February 25, 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made during the 1969 Milwaukee Project which was sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, and the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission of the City of Milwaukee, Richard W. E. Perrin, Chairman. The project was done under the direction of James C. Massey, then Chief of HABS, and the team members included architect John N. DeHaas, Jr. (Montana State University), Project Supervisor, Mary Ellen Wietczykowski--now Mary Ellen Young--(Milwaukee Landmarks Commission), Project Historian, and student architects Larry Hermsen (Iowa State University), Roger Little (Kansas University), Thomas Sanford (Washington State University), and Donna Woodrum (Virginia Polytechnic Institute). The drawings were edited by HABS architect John Burns and the data prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by HABS editors Carolyn R. Heath, Mary Farrell, Candace Reed and Philip Hamp. Photographs were taken by HABS staff photographer Jack Boucher.

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